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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: LABELING THE MILITANTS "BRN-C"

REF: BANGKOK 6595 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (d,b)

11. (C) SUMMARY/COMMENT: Thai officials and foreign observers have struggled to identify the militant movement responsible for the resurgent violence in far southern Thailand that has claimed over 1,000 lives since January 2004. The initial government response -- to blame criminals or local political feuds -- has gradually given way to the reality that an undefined movement is seeking to undermine state control. This cable outlines the growing consensus among Thai and foreign observers that a core group of native militants -- labeled the "BRN-C" -- is tapping into a much wider and looser network of disaffected youth, recruited through Islamic "pondok" schools, to carry out the attacks.

12. (C) Defining what exactly constitutes the "BRN-C" remains difficult. Militant cells in far southern Thailand are amorphous and have a difficult-to-characterize organizational structure. The identifiable organization that does exist appears to be based at the village level, has no identifiable leadership, and has failed to publicize its goals. The BRN-C, a faction of an old insurgent group from the 1960s, may have supplanted or absorbed other leading separatist groups. Because of its largely unstructured nature, the reach of the BRN-C is probably limited and should not be overemphasized when looking at the reasons behind the resurgent violence. Many ordinary citizens in the South who remain deeply estranged from the Central Thai government after decades of neglect are still willing to work through the system rather than support militants, e.g., by voting in elections, taking an interest in local bread-and-butter issues, etc. END SUMMARY/COMMENT

HOW ARE THE MILITANTS ORGANIZED?

13. (C) Militant cells in far southern Thailand are amorphous and have an organizational structure that is disparate and difficult to characterize. The identifiable organization that does exist appears to be based primarily at the village "grassroots" level. The groups have no clearly identifiable leadership or credible "spokesman in exile," and have not articulated any demands. Some speculate that this "silence" is a designed security measure. However, it is more likely a reflection of a lack of overarching leadership or clear objectives. Coordinated violence (as opposed to the more common isolated daily incidents) appears to be directed through a loose network. Recruited individuals -- almost always young Malay-Muslim males tapped at Islamic schools ("pondoks") are contacted by cell phone or word of mouth, given instructions for an attack, and afterward return to home life. Contacts between individuals appears to be the basis of organization rather than membership in a formal group.

14. (C) That said, there is growing consensus among the media and other observers of far southern Thailand that much of this organized violence across provinces is being directed by a core group often called the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-C). Thai government sources are generally in agreement, with officials often citing the group -- both publicly and privately -- as the source of organized attacks in the region. Anthony Davis, the long-time resident Thai analyst for Jane's Defence Weekly, told poloffs that he and many of his contacts in the Thai security services believe that the BRN-C is providing guidance for the disparate cells and has become the primary facilitator of the organized violence afflicting far southern Thailand.

15. (C) This may be an oversimplification of a less organized and more fluid system of violence, and the "BRN-C" may be turning into a convenient label for a far more complex and fluid situation on the ground. Some observers speculate that the BRN-C may be little more than a name given to what are largely independent cells, who are working autonomously except on the rarest of occasions. Others argue that Thai security forces -- desperate for an identifiable enemy to fight or parlay with -- might be overstating the capabilities of the BRN-C.

WHAT IS THE BRN-C?

16. (C) The BRN-C of the 1990's was a faction of the original Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN) founded in 1961 which has long called for an independent Pattani state. The core members of what is now called BRN-C are probably an amalgamation of committed individual militant members from different separatist groups. Membership is not exclusive and committed militants might be members of other groups as well. Tony Davis and staff members of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC - see reftel) report that the BRN-C's leadership is based in the northern Malaysian town of Kota Baru, but has operational cells in the southern Thai provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani. Davis and HDC claim that Malaysian authorities are aware of the presence of the BRN-C leadership in Malaysia.

17. (SBU) The original BRN was formed in response to RTG efforts to nationalize traditional pondok Islamic schools in the early 1960's. The Thai government has long viewed pondoks as the key component of their policy of assimilation and has had various programs over the past decades to register and force Thai national curriculum into the schools. For Muslims in the South, the pondoks are seen as preserves of their ethnic Malay cultural identity and are a central feature of village life. The Thai national curriculum -- with its strong Buddhist overtones -- is seen as a direct affront to their culture and religion. The BRN-C reportedly focuses on the pondoks for organization and recruitment activities, targeting teenagers and young men at the schools. An Amcit academic noted that these youths -- who have few prospects for employment after their education is complete -- have a stronger sense of Muslim identity than past generations and a growing sense of anger at their perceived mistreatment by the central Thai government.

HOW LARGE IS THE BRN-C?

18. (C) While there is growing consensus that members of the BRN-C are probably the organizing element behind the coordinated attacks which have occurred in the South over the past several years, there is little information available on the group's size. The number of active members of the group is probably very small -- perhaps only a few hundred members -- and this core group probably does not take a direct role in all the coordinated incidents. Instead, the BRN-C appears to be able to multiply its forces by calling on individual Malay-Muslim youths, tapped at pondoks, and organized at the village level as an auxiliary for larger attacks. These youths are given instructions to carry out individual attacks and do not appear to have any knowledge of cell structures or a larger organization.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OTHER SEPARATIST GROUPS?

19. (C) Other leading separatist groups do not appear to be playing a lead role in the major incidents in the South, or have been absorbed or supplanted by the BRN-C. (NOTE: This does not mean that the factionalization of the separatist groups, witnessed in 1970s and 1980s, has ended. END NOTE) Bersatu -- the supposed "umbrella" organization of southern separatist groups -- and its exiled leader Wan Khadir Che Man have no known involvement in operational attacks in the South. A noted Thai journalist with close contacts in the Muslim South told poloffs that Wan Khadir "would be killed" if he returned to Thailand by young militants who consider him a "sell-out." Another observer described the Pattani Islamic Mujahideen Movement (GMIP) as basically a criminal organization -- committing violence or providing expertise for profit either for separatist objectives or on behalf of criminal gangs. Most observers call the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), often the most vocal of separatist groups, "just a web-page," with little involvement or knowledge of operational attacks. However there are reports that one of PULO's exiled faction leaders, Shamsuddin Khan, may have contacts with BRN-C (reftel).

COMMENT: OLD GRIEVANCES STILL CENTER OF SOUTHERN VIOLENCE

10. (C) Over the past several years Southern Thailand has experienced a series of organized attacks which many observers attribute to what looks like the most credible operational separatist group in the South: the BRN-C. However, these incidents are only one part of a larger situation that includes other violence (daily shootings, arson, etc.) which is probably not the work of an organized militant group, but the result of crime or simply angry people acting alone. There is no shortage of reasons for local Malay-Muslims to decry decades of "injustices" from corrupt and inept Thai officials and security forces. But in our view, BRN-C should not be made out to be a larger than life organization. What the BRN-C has apparently been able to do is harness widespread frustration and anger to manipulate and mobilize parts of the Southern Thailand Malay-Muslim population -- especially the angry young males.

11. (C) We should also be careful not to overstate the importance of BRN-C for another important reason: most southern Thais themselves don't credit BRN-C or other separatist groups for being the primary source of the violence. When asked who is behind the violence most southerners blame criminals, internecine struggles between the police and army related to smuggling and other illicit activities, manipulative politicians -- and sometimes the U.S. Government -- more than separatist militants. Put simply, the BRN-C lacks street credibility. Unlike the GAM in Indonesia or the MILF in the Philippines, amorphous southern Thai separatists are not seen as spokesman for, or defenders of, the larger community. The separatists are not providing services to locals and are not a serving as the political voice of local aspirations. As the 76 percent local participation rate in last February's national election demonstrates, most southern Thais remain part of the process in Thailand, no matter how disaffected they feel or how much they dislike the current administration. They do not seem inclined to support the aspirations of the small, violent minority who are members of hard-core militant groups such as the BRN-C.

12. (C) While it would be a mistake to dismiss the ability of the BRN-C to perpetrate violent acts, the organization is not the powerful "silent hand" controlling the violence as depicted in some accounts. This is good news in the sense that there is still not an overarching political movement in the South demanding autonomy or independence or otherwise confronting the RTG on behalf of Southern Thailand's Malay Muslims. However, it is bad news because the loose organization of the militants makes it extremely difficult for the RTG to successfully disable the actual perpetrators of the violence. Even if PM Thaksin were to design and employ an effective short, mid, and long-term strategy to address underlying local grievances -- and he continues to grasp for such a strategy -- it will take years for the policy to take effect and to have an impact on ingrained mindsets. In the best case scenario, an enlightened government policy would ameliorate the violence somewhat (and reduce opportunities for exploitation by outside terrorists and extremists), but some level of tension and unrest would continue -- as it has for most of the past 100 years. END COMMENT
BOYCE